

Engaging with Mugabe

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ABSTRACT *Richard Dowden's feature in The Times (16 May 2005) was widely discussed at the Oxford British Zimbabwe Society Research Day—alongside the then ongoing destruction of shums in Harare. Richard Dowden, Director of the Royal African Society, but here writing in his personal capacity, has updated his piece for this issue of The Round Table. In a brief but masterly round-up of regional factors, Dowden concludes, bleakly that engaging with Mugabe may lead to few gains—but that the alternatives are worse.*

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Introduction

In the late 1980s Douglas Hurd, the then British Foreign Secretary, on his way to Zimbabwe asked me what I thought of Robert Mugabe. I ventured that in his heart the Zimbabwean president was still a one-party state socialist. “His heart?” Hurd scoffed, “Never worry about what is in a politician’s heart. Politicians have to do what they have to do.”

My inference is that Hurd assumed that whatever Mugabe felt in his heart, he would have to do, whatever he was told by the British and other donors, if he wanted to succeed and stay in power. It is an assumption that still underlies much of Western policy towards Africa: the donors have the power of the aid strings in many African states and therefore can control their politics.

It is wrong. All politics in Africa are local and personal. When African leaders are faced with a choice between appeasing the demands of local politics or international donors, they invariably choose the local. There is also an assumption in Western circles that African politicians would never deliberately impoverish their own countries or their people. If a country is doing well economically, that must boost a ruler’s popularity and power. If it is doing badly, the ruler will surely be kicked out. That too is wrong for much of Africa. In country after country in Africa we have seen rulers destroy their economies rather than leave or share power. As long as Africa’s wealthy and powerful elites and their families enjoy the fruits of office, they do not worry too much about what happens to the rest of the people. As they say in Kenya: “It does not matter how thin the cow gets if you are the only one on the teat”.

Zimbabwe’s economy is wrecked but Mugabe has never had more power. In the May 2005 elections he increased his majority in parliament enabling, him to

change the constitution. Even in the ludicrously unlikely case of the opposition winning all their electoral challenges in the courts, they would still not have a majority in parliament. That seemed a possible moment for Britain to accept the inevitable and re-engage with Zimbabwe. But the opportunity—if there was one—was missed and Mugabe set about making his political security into a complete dictatorship.

He reintroduced an upper house senate and packed it with his own nominees. Within the party he undermined the position of Emmerson Mnangagwa, a potential successor, thereby strengthening, if narrowing, his hold on ZANU (PF). However, many analysts detect a shift in power from the party to the military. Finally, he swept the poor—potential demonstrators—out of the towns in Operation Murambatsvina, ensuring that there could be no popular urban uprising in view of the media. Unless he chooses to change the constitution again, Mugabe now faces no electoral challenge until parliamentary elections in 2008.

The opposition movement, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which gave so many Zimbabweans hope when it emerged in 1999, has split along ethnic lines over whether to boycott elections for the senate. The party now lies fatally wounded, fought over by lawyers. Its leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, is isolated and discredited. An attempt to create a ‘Third Force’, between ZANU (PF) and the MDC has gone nowhere.

On the international front the African Union has managed to shrug off criticism that it has not acted on Zimbabwe, despite a fiercely critical report on Operation Murambatsvina by Anna Tibaijuka for the United Nations. South Africa has stayed quiet except for announcing security cooperation with Zimbabwe, which will, in the words of Ronnie Kasrils, South Africa’s security minister, let Zimbabwe and South Africa “march shoulder to shoulder”. The South Africans also announced a project to cooperate on training air force pilots. However, Billy Masetla, South Africa’s security intelligence chief, did express “huge concern” about the numbers of Zimbabweans fleeing across the South African border.

More than 80% of Zimbabweans now live below the poverty line and the economy has shrunk to two-thirds of what it was in 1999. Inflation is now estimated at over 500% and the Zimbabwe dollar, two to the US dollar in 1980, is now 110 000 to the dollar on the streets. The agriculture sector, Zimbabwe’s economic driver, has shrunk by more than a quarter. Most worryingly much of the sophisticated, if haphazard, irrigation systems on the commercial farms that allowed Zimbabwe to produce crops even in drought years have been ripped up and sold as scrap metal. This—and the expertise to run those farms—are Zimbabwe’s most grievous and lasting loss.

In February 2006 Zimbabwe paid off US\$9 million in arrears to the IMF thus avoiding loss of voting rights but that did not prevent the IMF immediately demanding radical economic reform. Between three and four million Zimbabweans have fled the country, mostly to South Africa, where most are forced to do jobs way below their qualifications. Will they go back? Past experience shows that those most successful elsewhere will stay out until they can find equivalent work back home. That is unlikely in their lifetime.

The general picture is that, barring dramatic events such as the death of Mugabe, Zimbabwe is heading for steepening decline which will end, not in an uprising or

resistance, but in mass poverty and starvation. There will be no dramatic collapse or meltdown, just a slow return to the Iron Age—with guns.

What does this mean for a policy for the rest of the world towards Zimbabwe? The British—given the nod by other Western nations to take the lead on Zimbabwe because of its colonial connection—got it wrong. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has always feared *The Daily Mail* more than any other political opponent or media voice. He chose to echo its strident line on Zimbabwe, despite the fact that it had always supported white rule in Zimbabwe. Making an assumption similar to Hurd's, the British thought they could warn Mugabe, threaten him, even browbeat him with words. Mugabe relished that treatment and returned the abuse with interest, accruing massive support from other Africans by replaying old anti-colonial tunes. Sanctions, smart or otherwise, did not even make him blink. It is unlikely that any of his loyal cronies have lost a single drop of malt whiskey as a result.

The British went ahead with that policy in the teeth of warnings from African leaders. When the policy broke there was no Plan B and there were no African allies willing to say much in public. One fallback position is to sit and wait either until Mugabe dies or until there is total collapse. But allowing things to get worse will not bring about positive change. People are too busy looking for something to eat to get involved in a political movement. The backbone of the opposition movement, the urban, educated, aspirant professionals, has left the country. Ignoring Zimbabwe will only allow things to spiral on down.

Nothing can be done by the UK or other countries on Zimbabwe without the agreement of South African President Thabo Mbeki. Severe wounds were inflicted on Anglo-South African relations when Mbeki was outvoted on the expulsion of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth in 2003. But it is clear that the UK, *The Daily Mail* notwithstanding, will not jeopardize its relationship with South Africa further over Zimbabwe. Elsewhere in Africa Western governments and companies have to worry about the Chinese and their search for raw materials and UN votes. Despite their lack of squeamishness about how they secure these elsewhere on the continent, the Chinese are unlikely to prop up Mugabe. In 2005 the Chinese spent some \$100 million on a platinum mine in Zimbabwe and sold military equipment. They also agreed to mutual support at the UN but while this helps Mugabe it does not provide him with the sort of aid that he needs let alone a saviour.

The question now is what sort of Zimbabwe might emerge once Mugabe is gone and how could Britain and the rest of the world contribute to rebuilding it. A plan should be drawn up now and made public, offering Zimbabwe a generous reconstruction package when Mugabe goes. It will probably make no political difference—Mugabe does not look like a man about to step down and the opposition is too weak to exploit such an offer. But it would give Zimbabweans hope for the longer term.

My guess is that Mugabe will not resign but prefer to die in office. Previously many assumed that when he went there would be a power shift and the opposition MDC would come to power. With the MDC permanently crippled it is more likely that Zimbabwe's next ruler will come from within ZANU (PF). But will the party survive his death or is Mugabe's rule a one-man dictatorship like that of Sani Abacha's in Nigeria or Mobutu's in Zaire where the power base—and the state—imploded when they died?

ZANU (PF) is now bitterly divided and these divisions are likely to explode when Mugabe goes. At the moment Joyce Mujuru, the vice president, would succeed but it is unlikely that she would be able to hold either the party or the country together for long. If the party were able to agree on a candidate such as Simba Makoni, the technocratic former finance minister, the rest of the world would be able to swing into action with the reconstruction plan. If, however, the party tears itself to pieces in civil war, the army would step into the power vacuum, making it far more difficult for outsiders to support it, particularly since all the army commanders are tainted with atrocities.

Under these scenarios it may seem counter intuitive to argue for greater engagement in Zimbabwe. What, many ask, is there to talk about? True, there is little to be gained directly, but all the alternatives are worse. Ignoring Zimbabwe will not make it go away or get better. Like sitting at the bedside of a delirious patient, remaining engaged and talking does no harm and it would leave Britain well placed to take a lead with African governments and institutions in helping Zimbabwe back on its feet again when the moment arrives.

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